

National ID Thoughts – Late April '04

I am impressed with our sheep working group's proposal that points out differences from the other species. It is gratifying to know that Congress, the USDA and Homeland Security certainly recognize the importance of livestock to our food supply and yet at the same time realize that it will take several years to implement a national I.D. program that is "realistically workable and affordable" (John Cargile's quote).

It is not my intention to be against a national ID program and certainly it sounds good to the public and as a trade policy tool. However, it is my opinion that too much emphasis is being placed solely on the mechanics of tagging, recording and reporting of domestic animals in the USA. I.D. while important is only one tool in the over-all equation of public health, animal diseases and bioterrorism. Maybe discussions have been held elsewhere that are broader and more scientific. Fortunately we have had several researchers and state DVM's who worked in the UK during their recent out break of mad cow and hoof & mouth diseases.

But are we getting back many details in out working groups just how effective the massive slaughter of healthy (but exposed) animals was in the program? Some say 48 – hour trace back is too slow for the H & M. Others say there are other alternatives. What was the economic impact in the UK? BSE affects only a small % of cattle and the public health concerns are still debatable according to some. Scrapie in sheep and goats thus far are not known to affect humans. H & M is not transmitted to humans. But, these are the 3 primary diseases that we discuss.

We sure do not want H & M to return to the USA, but what plans do we have in place if it does come to the USA or to a nation with a poor inspection and reporting system that exports meat products to the USA? Do you honestly think the USA public and press are going to support mass slaughter? Very little is said about numerous other countries living with H & M. Is it true that H & M does not kill all animals that are infected and exposed? There are vaccines available. It is not my intentions to promote these other alternatives at this time because of my lack of experience with these diseases but it sure seems like the working groups made up of different industry

segments should at least be learning and discussing more about specific (including the above 3 but not limited to them especially other disease that affect humans) diseases and worldwide approaches. The USA is definitely different in many ways to the UK – including size, variable climate, transportation speed and distances, neighbors, open range in parts of our nation, more public lands, and larger concentrations in feedlot. Hopefully, the researchers, agencies, DVM's and drug companies with experience are developing plans and alternatives. If we lose a large % of our livestock we will not need to worry about exports. We will need to worry about feeding our own people. Therefore, security prevention and early diagnosis by educated inspectors practitioners and producers are essential to go along with an I.D. program.

We are told that West Nile is now here to stay in the USA. Other diseases including Brucellosis, TB, Anthrax, rabies, bird flu's, and salmonella do affect humans. We have not talked much about these and other diseases. Animal I.D. is not going to stop a terrorist. How are we going to kill or tag all the birds that fly from S. America to Canada? What about the wildlife, deer, elk, wild sheep, wild hogs and buffaloes, etc on private, state and federal lands? Are we working with these groups in educating & planning for such unpleasant reality?

Very few want to mention drug residue trace back and/or the lack of approved drugs for several species. Even some nations that export products to our fellow USA citizens can use drugs that are banned from our nation. And they purchase them at a cheaper price also. We are told that COOL and source verification are separate issues from animal I.D. Who are we kidding? Why make all USA producers jump through the hoops and let imported meat come in through designed loop holes? Meat for cafes, if imported, would not have to have I.D. according to some reports. We are told that at least 26 nations export some meat to the USA. How many of these countries (some will do a good job) do you honestly think will develop and enforce with integrity the same I.D. and food inspection programs that will soon be mandated on all USA producers? Some producers will go out of business. Oh sure, we will have a few inspectors to check some incoming shipments. We are told that maybe 5% of people and vehicles coming through customs will be spot checked for concealed birds, pets & meat, yet our officials want 100% of all our domestic livestock to be identified.

We hear very little about the 76 million cases of food poisoning in a recent year including 5000 deaths among USA citizens. Is it true that a large %

of our produce is imported? How do we inspect or trace them? Some nations still use banned chemicals and poor sanitation procedures. E. coli comes in on produce also – not just meat.

In the different discussions by some of the working groups, it has been properly mentioned that shows and fairs provide a greater risk of spreading diseases. Many states do not have the \$ nor staff to inspect trailers & trucks with animals for updated and accurate health certificates at state lines or regional fairs much less at some state fairs. Are we enforcing and utilizing existing procedures and precautions that are already in place - such as health certificates, vaccines, eradication programs, inspections and, quarantine authority? A lot of the public & press really do not know that we already have these tools and a superior food safety program in place. Even without a new electronic, computerized national I.D program, most if not all of our state animal health commissions are grossly under funded. Do you know how few \$ your AHC, state diagnostic lab and federal officials assigned to your state have in their budgets? It is my view that if we are really serious about these public and animal disease issues along with bioterrorism that public officials are going to need to first “beef” up the existing infrastructure before we start up a new program that will cost millions each year by itself. Yes, we can ear tag & belatedly report. (for the thousands of us producers and industry employees who cannot operate a computer or know how to work a non-functional scanner in the dark hours or long miles away from back up service). But will it really be successful for its intended purpose of protecting the public and improving the producer’s economic gains?

Another realistic concern that has been expressed in some groups is will we have enough large animal DVM’s to properly inspect animals for health certificates after the animals’ I.D numbers have been recorded for health certificates after the animals have been grouped for each new “put together” loads of animals? Big auction ring runs; video sales, and order buyers shipping to feed lots and to both coasts for ethnic holidays will take a lot of time to get necessary protocol properly completed after the “sales.” How many market operators and dealers are going to have enough trained employees and truck drivers who know the rules, cut out those animals who do not have a tag or for some reason does not “scan” @ midnight? Time is of essence in getting animals shipped to avoid more shrink, disease and deaths. Hopefully the health certificate can be done before too late in the day. Will the focus be on getting the “darn” animals scanned and possibly forget to look seriously for early stages of an infectious disease? Do you think a

terrorist is going to worry about ear tags (they could be cut out) and health certificates especially if the terrorist does not cross state lines? Or they might just visit a large state fair to disperse some foreign agent that is in a small test tube.

Yes, this sounds negative, but it is not meant to be! We have got to keep moving forward and try to keep American livestock producers in business. In my view, we need to use these next few years while the world is studying electronic I.D to look at a bigger picture. Right now the press, public & Congress are hearing a lot about trace back and animal I.D. We may be embarrassed, faced with a back lash and have wasted a lot of time/ money on the mechanics of "tagging" if we do not change gears now to place more up front emphasis on the following;

1. Public and producers education (we already have to some degree but some current news releases are over simplified).
2. Develop realistic fair trade policy.
3. Encourage other nations to implement and enforce similar programs if they want to export to us.
4. Develop complete plans that go beyond I.D
5. Fund, pursue and demand that the pilot projects being proposed for the different species is undertaken as soon as possible. This #5 was added to this list after attending our sheep & goat group meeting in Chicago May '04.

Some have said that very few will even take the time to read these 4 pages of hand written notes. That well may be true! If so, how many producers, press corp, agencies, practitioners, market operators, dealers, slaughter house operators, legislators and their aides are going to take the time to read the 300 plus pages of published Federal Registry, UM & R's, State guidelines and the many different drafts. That much information is very difficult to condense down into a small leaflet.

These comments by Joe David Ross DVM (TAMU '59 and practiced until early 70's), are not meant to be published but are being sent to a few on the sheep and goat working groups and other individuals. I am certainly open to suggestions. Now is the time for all of us to speak up and continue working together. Thanks for your patience.